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Separation Anxiety: The cure is straw?!

Not quite, but straw can indeed be a helpful tool when crating dogs who suffer from anxiety, especially when crated. How did you discover this Marc? Why does it work? Who should use it? How do you do it? I have been asked these and other questions so often that I've written this guide so I'll never have to talk about it again!

Sit down children and listen to a not so quick story.

Once upon a time I fostered a Doberman who was fairly nutty in the crate. I noticed that she tore up any bedding I gave her such as towels or blankets. I became afraid that she'd ingest this stuff and impact. However, without any form of bedding, she fussed and became very agitated in the crate. What to do?

I decided to try and make up some sort of crate activity that would distract her from her woes, but would also yield some sort of bedding in the process. So I began to place cardboard boxes in the plastic airline type crate, and place some kibbles or treats in those boxes. The dog would spend happy hours tearing apart those boxes, finding those treats and eating them. By the time the boxes were demolished, she had a thick layer of confetti to sleep on and she'd root around in that a bit to find the last of the kibbles.

Then she'd sleep.

Eureka! But of course, eventually I ran out of cardboard boxes and decided to try a new tactic. I shredded newspapers into long strips and filled the crate with a very thick fluffy layer of newspapers. The dog rooted around in this equally well, tore some of it into smaller strips, and then would eventually relax in the crate. It seemed to me that she was doing nesting behaviors, and this was more settling than a bare crate which only agitated her. A few months later, she was crate trained and didn't need anything in the crate.

Eventually I placed this dog into a lovely forever home and promptly forgot all about this nonsense.

Years later a man called me after business hours and insisted that he wanted to bring me a screaming

Lab puppy THAT SAME NIGHT, but he also promised to bring a large wad of cash. So over he comes and the puppy was sleeping in his arms. 9 weeks old, tender, adorable. And sleeping.

“You can't crate this puppy,” he says, his eyes glowing red, “or he'll scream and you won't sleep. I haven't slept in four days. Good luck.”

He threw money at me and bolted out of the door, the puppy now sleeping in MY arms. Zonked. Out like a light.

I crept over to the crate, gently opened it. Oh so carefully I laid the sleepy baby into the crate and held my breath. Nothing. Gentle snoring. Perfect! I begin to tenderly close the door, and one eye opens. The other eye opens. And then he screams. And screams. And screams. His head rotated 360 degrees and he vomited pea soup all over me, or at least it seemed so.

I rapped on the crate. I shook the crate. I covered the crate.

After one hour of nonstop screaming, screaming without surcease, screaming that left my hands shaking, I tried things that I won't even tell you about. But nothing worked.

I wracked my brain which is a little hard to do with everlasting screams so fierce that it gets into your head like a nail gun shooting ten penny nails through your ears directly into your frontal lobe. Now it's nearly midnight and out of my mind I quickly thrust away the idea of sleeping with the little bastard. But what to do???

Newspapers! I need newspapers! Crap, don't have any. Boxes! I need boxes. Crap, don't have any of those either. But wait! I had a phone book. So I tore out pages from Auto to Pizza and I started to crumple each sheet into a tightly wadded ball. I piled a bunch of them by the crate, puppy hasn't broken stride at all. He's screaming with all his might and doesn't even have the courtesy to pass out. But he sort of has an eye on me while I'm piling up paper balls outside his crate and when the pile is considerable, I open the crate and he screams while I shovel in all the paper balls I've made.

He's only toe deep in paper. And he's still screaming.

So I keep making paper balls. By the time I pour the second load of them into his crate, he stops screaming. He's just watching me quizzically because this is really strange! And I load paper balls into that crate until this puppy isn't quite buried in them. He looks like a small monkey in the McDonalds plastic ball pool where kids bury themselves in colored balls. I'm out of paper, so I stop. Anyway, he's almost under water now anyway.

He's been watching me, but now I'm done. So I watch him. And THAT is when this puppy turns three circles to nest into those blessed yellow pages balls, and he lays down. He's out like a light in ten seconds. I creep upstairs and sleep 8 hours. When I get up, I run on tiptoes down to the crate...and OH MY GOD HE'S DEAD...laying belly up, tongue completely lolled out of his mouth. The f-ing puppy is f-ing DEAD and somehow I've killed him with toxic yellow pages.

I gasped. And that's when he opened an eye. The little bastard hadn't slept in four days either. But he wasn't screaming. Anyway, he was fit as a fiddle and every day I pulled a handful of those balls out of

the crate, and before too long he could sleep in a crate with nothing special.

The next time I had a dog with crate anxiety I knew I had to come up with something better, and that's when I remembered the farmer up the street with the "straw for sale sign." So I tried that instead and found that it worked great. So here are the tips:

Use an airline plastic crate and fill it hip deep to the dog with straw

- Don't use hay because that is dried grasses and dogs are more likely to eat it
- Dogs don't normally eat the straw, but you can keep an eye if you're worried
- You can use long strips of newspaper if you prefer, but it gets dirty and dusty
- Put a sheet under the crate to make for easy clean up. Straw is messy in the house
- It works because it engages the dog's nesting/denning instinct
- Many breeders keep puppies in some sort of organic bedding for a few weeks so straw is like old home week
- It is comforting to dogs to have something pressuring their body in the crate
- Straw encourages *some* crate dirty dogs to be clean, but check for wet spots
- Discontinue if you're getting more crate eliminating rather than less
- Change the straw at least weekly. They like new straw. It's like getting clean sheets.
- I use it more for crate anxiety rather than housebreaking
- If the dog digs around and fluffs the straw, so much the better
- Foraging in the crate is better than freaking out in the crate, so you can toss in some treats
- Straw helps rest time be more restful for many crate anxious dogs, but they probably still need more exercise than they're getting
- I'd give it at least a few weeks, but then you can remove handfuls of straw per day to wean off
- Feel free to adapt any of these ideas as needed for your dog.
- **Don't ask me any questions! I've already answered them all. Twice.**

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